

Statement of Steve Johnson,
Director of Strategic Initiatives,
The Nature Conservancy, California chapter,
before the Commission on the California Performance Review,
Fresno, California, September 17, 2004

- Thank you for the opportunity to testify about your review of governmental performance. I am Steve Johnson, Director of Strategic Initiatives for California chapter of The Nature Conservancy.
- The Nature Conservancy is an international non-profit membership organization whose mission is to preserve the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

The California chapter is The Nature Conservancy's largest state program. The California program has 120,000 members and has protected nearly 1.2 million acres in the state. We are currently engaged with various state and local agencies in some 16 large-scale conservation projects throughout California, from the Lassen Foothills in the northern Sacramento Valley to inland San Diego County.

- Since the establishment of its first California nature preserve in 1959, The Nature Conservancy has viewed California as the top conservation priority in the United States and one of the highest conservation priorities in the world because of its remarkable biological diversity.

But this unparalleled natural diversity, from the ocean to the deserts, from redwood forests to vernal pools, is threatened throughout the state by population growth, residential and commercial development that fragments and destroys native habitat, unwise logging and grazing practices, excessive diversions of water from our rivers, and many other factors.

- With the threats to our natural heritage in mind, we must ask whether the changes proposed in this California Performance Review will do enough to protect these natural resources.
 - ◆ Have the problems been properly identified?
 - ◆ Will the proposed changes promote efficiency and effectiveness?
 - ◆ Will the changes enhance efforts to conserve our natural resources?
 - ◆ Will the changes serve the people who want access to these important resources in this and in future generations?
- The organizational changes proposed for the state resources departments are so sweeping that it is difficult even to begin to answer these questions. It is difficult to analyze which problems are being solved by:
 - ◆ the restructuring of the Resources Agency as a Department

- ◆ the centralization of service functions — legal, IT and financial management
- ◆ the transfer of certain land and water management functions into and out of various divisions

Such structural reorganizations and centralizations are not inherently more efficient, and they can greatly reduce the effectiveness of critical resource acquisition and management programs. If the CPR proposes these changes, it should clearly define why these changes are the best solutions to clear and critical problems.

- It is difficult to understand how excising the Department of Water Resources from the Resources Department makes managing and protecting water resources — and the wildlife that depends on them — more efficient and effective.

Water does not become an infrastructure issue until it flows through a 20-inch pipe. Before then, water is primarily habitat. In fact, the greatest concentration of rare and endangered species in California is found in water and its associated habitats. Proper management of wildlife and fish is the number one issue facing water development in the state. It is difficult to see how these issues are better addressed by splitting water resource responsibilities and authorities into three departments with divergent missions and goals.

- Likewise, we are deeply concerned about the proposal to strip the law enforcement functions of the existing resource departments and transfer them to a new Department of Homeland Security, as outlined in recommendations PS01 and PS02.

Enforcing laws regarding wildlife and parks may be similar in some respects to other, more typical law enforcement efforts, but it is really a very different enterprise, with different goals and very divergent operational needs — including the need for specialized legal support.

The officers charged with enforcing wildlife and parks laws and regulations need to be integral parts of the departments they serve. They need to know the scientists, the naturalists, and the resource specialists. They need to be part and parcel of the resource protection function and remain as part of the team — not as someone from another department on an unrelated resource protection assignment. Resource protection officers are a special breed, dedicated and motivated to a special calling. This is a culture we need to nurture and support — yet recommendations PS01 and PS02 would undermine that goal.

- California has shown great wisdom and leadership with the combined functions of its forest conservation and fire protection activities. Wildland fire management is every bit as important to watershed protection and forest conservation as are good logging practices.
 - ◆ Fire management is not just about emergency services. It is about using fire and managing suppression and pre-suppression activities to improve the health of California's forests and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. While this is a balancing act, simply relegating forest fire management to putting out fires in an "emergency service" role —

as recommendation PS03 would do — is a step backward that will surely degrade forest health, lead to more destructive wildfires, and increase costs to the state.

- In some places, the California Performance Review identifies legitimate problems but provides solutions that would require more thought and deliberation before we can support them.
 - ◆ For example, recommendation RES21 proposes several changes in the timber harvest regulatory process. We concede that timber harvest regulation is a very important component of any comprehensive natural resources protection program, and we agree that the issue needs to be addressed and that this may be an opportune time to make progress. However, we also believe that it is premature to identify exactly how this reform would best be accomplished. Recommendation RES21 correctly identifies a problem but jumps the gun on a solution.
 - ◆ Similarly, recommendation RS12 argues that there are too many land acquisition entities with too many agendas. Recommendation RS12A calls for the elimination of a number of conservancies as the solution to the problem, but recommendation RS12B calls for the creation of a master plan for acquisition.

We believe that RS12B is a good idea, and if it were in place, RS12A would be irrelevant and unnecessary because the local conservancies would be efficiently and effectively protecting state priorities in a manner more accessible and responsive to the public.

- There are, within the report, a number of insightful recommendations that, in our view, merit careful consideration and support.
 - ◆ For example, recommendation RS31 calls for the creation of a registry of mitigation sites. This might well provide some sorely needed focus for this very important component of resource funding.
 - ◆ Recommendation RS13, which consolidates the land acquisition process, is also a very positive recommendation. It eliminates an outdated, inefficient, and fundamentally flawed appraisal review process, and it does away with the disconnect between the Department of General Services and the Public Works Board on the one hand and on the other hand, the conservation agency for which it is doing the acquisition work. We believe that consolidating land acquisition functions would enable the state to do a better job of identifying and implementing the state's highest priorities for land protection. That said, we hope that consolidation does not eliminate the tremendous in-house land acquisition expertise that each agency's staff presently has.
- In conclusion, let me say that the process of reinventing government is difficult and thankless. We believe that an aggressive but deliberate approach is the best way to produce substantial savings, in terms both of dollars and of our irreplaceable natural heritage.